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ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Mahbub KABIR (Bangladesh)

Chapter ____

ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM IN PROMOTING ENDOGENOUS CAPACITY-BUILDING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES IN THE FIELD OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

(Agenda item 5)

1. The officer-in-charge of the Centre for Science and Technology for Development introduced the documents (A/CN.11/1991/4 and A/CN.11/1991/CRP.1), under this agenda item. He stated that the major task since the Vienna Conference in 1979 had been to codify the concept of endogenous capacity-building in science and technology, the centrepiece of the Vienna Programme of Action on Science and Technology for Development, and to operationalize it in the context of the specificity of individual countries so as to distinguish generic science and technology activities that were mostly subsumed under sectors such as agriculture and industry from those that could be deemed directly contributory to that complex process. The Advisory Committee on Science and Technology for Development, having dealt with this subject and having made important contributions to the definition and design of the concept, was continuing its work with a view to producing more specific operational criteria.

2. The ACC Task Force on Science and Technology for Development had initiated, in selected developing countries, pilot programmes that were being implemented by the Centre. In addition to Jordan, Nepal, Thailand and the United Republic of Tanzania, in which these programmes were already under implementation, six more countries had been chosen for similar pilot programmes supported by a trust fund provided by the Government of Germany through the United Nations Fund for Science and Technology for Development (UNFSTD). A comprehensive evaluation of these activities, to be undertaken in early 1993, would be followed by a workshop in which country representatives, the United Nations system and various experts would participate. The Centre would then bring out a detailed "how-to" manual for the benefit of other developing countries. The Centre had adopted a two-pronged approach in preparing its contribution to the Intergovernmental Committee on Science and Technology for Development comprising the undertaking of impact assessments in the context of specific countries through inter-agency missions and the commencing of a more organized and broader process through the Advisory Committee. The summary of replies that, in line with considerations developed by the Advisory Committee, had been received from the different organizations of the United Nations system had been made available to the Intergovernmental Committee in the form of a conference room paper.

3. One representative said that his country was one of the few fortunate nations to be benefiting from the endogenous capacity projects. The programmes, he emphasized, deserved strong support by the entire international community. The objectives of the International Development Strategy for the Fourth United Nations Development Decade would not be achieved in the field of science and technology for development in relation to modernizing and transforming the industrial and agricultural sectors, he stated, if such current programmes did not culminate in implementable programmes.

4. He stressed that although the Centre's report had acknowledged some of the programmes' stated weaknesses, not all developing countries had been entrapped by those weaknesses. The Secretary-General's report, he noted, had addressed the issue of endogenous capacity-building, while the South Commission's report, The Challenge to the South, had addressed indigenous capacities. The Secretary-General's report had stressed that endogenous capacity was neither the same as indigenous research capacity nor was it synonymous with infrastructure building. Though conceptually complex, endogenous capacity-building was essential for a scientific and technological breakthrough in developing countries, the representative added. Since the report had attributed the failure to implement the goals of the Vienna Programme to an absence of clarity in the endogenous capacity concept and in its implementation, the Intergovernmental Committee should carefully analyse that assertion.

5. In recent years, he concluded, transfer of technology from developed to developing countries had met with determined unwillingness from the developed countries. Since, as the report had noted, many developing countries were struggling to survive as pre-industrial communities, the need for external assistance to achieve genuine endogenous capacity could not be

overemphasized. In that regard, he expressed appreciation to the mission of experts that had recently visited his country with the purpose of defining a programme of technical assistance in the field of building materials production based on a strategy of technology transfer.

6. The representative of a developed country said that the situation with regard to the stock of knowledge might be improved through establishment of local subsidiaries of international corporations, imports, licensing, joint ventures, collaboration agreements and the hiring of experts. "Absorptive capability" referred to the application of such knowledge, which required creativity and innovation and might be promoted through the formulation of appropriate governmental policies. He supported the argument that developing countries must develop their absorptive capability, namely, the ability to choose, to apply and to adapt. That argument had been the central theme of the Vienna Programme.

7. He emphasized that developing countries must apply the general concept of endogenous capacity-building in the light of their specific needs within the field of science and technology, reflecting their domestic socio-economic, geopolitical and cultural status, as well as their stage of development. Endogenous capacity-building was thus a country-specific operation, that required strong initiative by the appropriate authorities in all countries wishing to launch such a process.

8. The representative stressed that the Centre must work to sensitize the bilateral and multilateral donor community to the importance of endogenous capacity-building by developing countries and he recommended that the Centre encourage the appropriate authorities in developing countries to identify and assess their technology needs and plan projects for endogenous capacity-building.

9. The representative of another developed country said that his delegation continued to attach major importance to endogenous capacity-building in developing countries. Those countries were still not in a position to backstop their evaluation and selection of modern technologies with an adequate number of experts. They were experiencing the same lack in the increasingly important area of assessment of the impact of new technologies on society, the economy and the environment. In view of the global threat to climate and to ecological resources, he said, growing importance should be given to the question of the environmental compatibility of new technologies. Only countries with an adequate capacity of their own in that area would be able, in the long term, to reconcile modern technological imperatives with the preservation of their natural resources as a basis for sustained economic growth and for meeting their citizens' basic requirements. He agreed with the Secretary-General that endogenous capacity-building in science and technology was the critical component of sustainable development. That subject should be given broader consideration in the course of further work by the Centre and in view of the forthcoming World Conference on Environment and Development, in 1992.

10. The representative of a developed country agreed with the Secretary-General's report, especially on the need for close coordination of activities within the United Nations system. He commended the efforts of the Advisory Committee, which attached great importance to endogenous capacity-building, and supported the conclusion that the impact of the United Nations system in promoting endogenous capacity-building should be global in character.

11. As interrelated global problems led to new requirements, he said, the harmonization of targets and objectives was crucial. Changes in the political climate would undoubtedly have an impact on scientific and technological development. In light of the importance of multilateral cooperation for endogenous capacity-building in the developing countries, the need to look for new approaches in preparing methodologies and criteria for assessment was urgent. He commended the work done by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in that field and hoped the Centre would further contribute to the work being done. He also hoped that cooperation among the members of the ACC Task Force would further improve.

12. The representative of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) drew conclusions on endogenous capacity-building based on the work of his organization. With respect to human resources development, he said, endogenous capacity-building involved three distinct stages, namely, the nurturing of individual skills, the assembling of the persons embodying such skills into effective organizations and the infusion of zeal and purpose into those skills. He pointed out that the process of endogenous capacity-building varied according to the size of the country as well as from sector to sector. Small countries faced intractable difficulties in expanding technological capacity and in devising and implementing effective technology policies. As for differences among economic sectors, endogenous capacity-building in the secondary sector could be task-specific while endogenous capacity-building in the tertiary sector could not be measured by the mastery of a technology. Indeed, an ILO secondary-sector case study had concluded that in addition to macroeconomic policy instruments, both governmental and non-governmental institutions played a crucial role in the accumulation of technological capacity over time.

13. He stated that endogenous capacity-building might pose a policy dilemma since existing technical capability constituted a scarce resource that could be deployed to either generate current output and employment or create greater technological capability. Such a policy dilemma, he said, might be translated into a choice between immediate smaller increases in output and employment and much larger future gains in both areas.

14. The representative of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies said that in his country the concepts of economy and ecology were complementary. Many of the ecological, resource and environmental disasters now besetting the world were the consequence of the so-called development stimulated by science and technology. A point had been reached where the sustainability of the planet itself was increasingly in doubt, he said.

15. Sustainable development, he noted, was so far the most used, even abused, term of the 1990s. Theories about sustainable development that had evolved under the auspices of the United Nations were very admirable, but as long as the most desperate problems of the developing countries were not addressed all promises were hollow. He himself came from a "sub-subsistence" country with a "stressed" ecology. He had recently been assigned to define an achievable and acceptable scenario for a world of radically changed climate for the year 2050 and he had concluded that without mass participation in programmes to avert environmental and economic disaster and a radical change in lifestyles, particularly in the developed countries, such a society could not be achieved.

16. For science and development to bring about transformation in developing countries, he went on, there had to be a reordering of priorities and a readjustment of focus. In past centuries, there had been a net increase in the flow of wealth from south to north, whereas the flow of technology from north to south had been restricted. That restricted flow had been partly due to the south's incapacity to use relevant information. However, efforts must now be made to reverse that flow. There must be an unhindered flow of information and technology from north to south. Acceptance of its moral responsibility by the north was a prerequisite for such a flow.

17. In the world's poorest countries, he went on, the environment and the economy were inseparable from survival. Scarce resources that had been harmoniously exploited for centuries were now under such pressures, from deforestation and overfishing, for example, as to be threatened with total depletion. Development to meet the needs of the few were denying the basic tools of survival to the many. The poorest countries had often depended on the most vulnerable systems. He was pleased that the Intergovernmental Committee had made their survival a priority question.

18. The officer-in-charge of the Centre stated that there was a broad consensus that the Secretary-General's report had provided a valuable and substantive basis for discussion within the Intergovernmental Committee. There was also a broad consensus regarding the approach to be followed in building and strengthening the endogenous capacities of developing countries. Furthermore, there was general agreement that such a process required external support from the donor community and that it was imperative that more specific criteria for impact assessments be developed. Terms such as "indigenous development" and "endogenous development" should be harmonized to provide the United Nations system with a common term for conveying the concept and meaning of endogenous capacity-building. There was also a need both for closer coordination at the country level and for the incorporation of an environmental dimension as well as one related to sustainable development within the concept of endogenous capacity-building.